

The Hypothesis of Deception

Certain friends of the research in extra-sensory perception have recently informed us of rumors and gossip in which broad implications were made that the subjects at Duke University and at other places were practicing deception in the ESP tests, "pulling the leg" of the experimenters, and that even when caught, these deceptions were deliberately withheld from the public by the investigators. Such rumors have also reached us by other routes, and one such has recently appeared in at least one Spiritualistic journal. They appear to have originated in psychic research circles having to do largely with professional mediums.

For the ESP experimenter in the psychological laboratory the problem of excluding deception on the part of the subject is of course an aspect of the broader problem of excluding the possibility of sensory cues. The goal of the experimenter is the complete exclusion of all possible sensory cues, which includes assuming the dishonesty of the subject. This goal led to the introduction and use of sealed opaque envelopes, opaque wooden screens, and the separation of the cards from the subject by distances and walls.

In other words, while our psychical research friends suspect *some* of the ESP subjects, it might be said the ESP investigators are on guard against them *all*, or, more exactly, anticipate the possibility of any one of the group of subjects tested being willfully disposed to deceive, and are prepared to make it impossible for any of them to do so.

To such an extreme has this attitude of safeguarding of the experiments against willful or unwitting deception been carried that no magician, whose profession it is to deceive is willing to attempt to work (as magician) under such conditions.

The answer, then, to all those who suspect the honesty of subjects is: If under the conditions deception is humanly possible, the conditions are not adequate to establish the degree of confidence required for so weighty a conclusion as the occurrence of extra-sensory perception. Consequently, if it be discovered (and we have no anticipation of it being so) that one or more of the subjects in the ESP research turns out later to be of questionable character, it will have no bearing upon conclusions based on conditions in which sensory perception was clearly excluded as a possibility. As a matter of fact, in two such experiments a professional magician acted as a subject; and yet there is no ground for discriminating against his results in the tests.

It is of course to be expected, with the hundreds of subjects dealt with, including wide ranges of groups, ages, and classes, that some indications of a will-to-deceive should occasionally appear, more particularly with children when rewards are offered. But it has long been the rule not to draw final conclusions of the occurrence of ESP, except on the basis of conditions which, even given a subject with intent to deceive, fully exclude all sensory cues. As has often been repeated, no research has been submitted* without conditions in which either the cards are screened from the subject, or distance and walls intervene in a sufficient portion of the series to safeguard the conclusions. Thus the ESP conclusions can be in no danger from this source.

Given any evidence or suggestion of an intent of the subject to deceive, and given a set of conditions allowing any possibility of its being successful, the results of the series by that subject and for those conditions would be excluded from all serious consideration as a matter of course: the mere possibility alone, however, is sufficient to bar data from acceptance as evidence of ESP.

A further point is frequently associated with this hypothesis of deception. It is vigorously urged in some quarters that when we encounter a case of willful

* Except one in which the experimenter was her own subject.

deception we should hold the spectacle up to public scrutiny and publish it quite as freely and frankly as we report the test results. The many contacts established by the Laboratory with a wide range of claims and claimants to extrasensory abilities has naturally led to our encountering a number of phenomena which on closer investigation proved to be fraudulently produced. We do not feel, however, that any good purpose could be served by the exposure, à la Houdini, of these instances. In many of them the subjects were the victims more of ignorance of the importance of scientific soundness, than of dishonesty.

In a word, a research project in ESP does not become of conclusive scientific importance until it reaches the point at which even the greatest will-to-deceive can have no effect under the conditions. This criterion is the very threshold of the research field. It leaves us under no obligation to concern ourselves either with the ethics of the subjects or with the morbid curiosity of a few individuals.

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